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AUTHOR Miles, Paul L.
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ABSTRACT

The Teacher Continuous Feedback Technique (CFT), makes it possible for teachers to collect continuous student critiques of their teaching. The data collected can then be used as the basis for individual faculty development. A selected number of students are requested to write an anonymous critique each class meeting. In order to track performance, it is advisable to have specific items for students to respond to in addition to open ended comments. Immediate feedback captures the significance of CFT as a communication approach; its value will be enhanced by using effective practices in giving and receiving feedback. Students should receive directions on at least two guidelines for giving feedback: being descriptive and being specific. Guidelines for the instructor to follow in receiving feedback include: stating what you want feedback about, checking what you have heard, and sharing your reactions to the feedback. The most important of these guidelines is to share reactions with the students to the feedback. Students will continue to respond openly if the teacher is both open and responsive to suggestions. Using the CFT appears to benefit the instructor in several areas: an increase in self-monitoring and in an ability to discriminate between effective/ineffective behaviors, a greater sensitivity and responsiveness to students both in and out of class, a strengthened motivation to teach well, and an increasing ability to be open to student feedback. (One figure is included and 16 references are attached.) (MG)

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A Communication Based Strategy to Improve Teaching: The Continuous Feedback Technique

Paul L. Miles
School of Communication
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID 83843

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What is being reported here is a communication based strategy to aid teachers interested in improving their effectiveness in the classroom. The approach, labelled The Teacher Continuous Feedback Technique (CFT), makes it possible for teachers to collect continuous student critiques of their teaching. Continuous refers to the practice of collecting student feedback each class period. The data collected in the critiques can then be used as the basis for individual faculty development.

Usually feedback to teachers comes in the form of evaluations administered at the close of the semester. These evaluations serve a dual purpose: they provide administrators with information for evaluating faculty and they provide faculty with the student's perspective on their teaching.

However, as Aubrecht (1979) points out, a system that is relatively valid for one purpose (evaluation) will not necessarily be valid for another (improvement of instruction). A summary of research on teacher evaluation (Aubrecht, 1979) attests to the reliability of student rating forms; Aubrecht further claims that they are valid because "student ratings are strongly related to the ratings of teacher effectiveness by administrators, peers, and (most important) teachers themselves."

On the other hand, Kulik and McKeachie's (1975) summary of studies on evaluation of teachers found no convincing evidence that information from the evaluations help teachers

improve their effectiveness. This is not surprising given the stable nature of student ratings revealed in longitudinal studies (Blackburn, 1985).

Kulik and McKeachie's conclusion related to the application of teacher evaluations for improving teaching is instructive:

> Student ratings do not provide feedback. The metaphor of the homeostat suggests an integrated system in which performance is continually monitored and adjusted according to the information that is fed back. Student ratings may be too delayed, too global, too judgmental, and too anonymous to have an impact on practice.

Faculty development programs are an attempt to provide feedback to faculty in a form that can be used to improve instruction. Erickson (1979) notes in his review that much is known about "faculty development" programs and activities, but little research has studied their effectiveness. However, the studies that have been reported are encouraging. Investigations by Hoyt and Howard (1978) revealed a positive relationship between the extent of faculty contact with a faculty development office and improved student ratings. Two experimental studies (Hoyt 1978, Erickson 1979) of faculty development resulted in significant improvement in teacher ratings. In the program reported by Boice (1986), participants whose previous ratings were in the bottom quartile, received ratings above the mean for their department.

There are a couple of problems with traditional faculty development programs; they are not generally available and

it is questionable that those in place reach faculty with the greatest need (Eble & McKeachie 1985). A possible cause for resistance to such programs comes from the Tuckman & Oliver's study (1968). They report that teachers receiving feedback from supervisors tend to change in the opposite direction to what was suggested by the feedback. In contrast, feedback from students led to effects in a positive direction in comparison to the no-feedback condition. So, despite teacher defensiveness to feedback, it appears that teachers are responsive to feedback from students.

In summary, teachers value and can profit from student feedback but primarily receive that feedback in a form ill suited to faculty development; the end of semester teacher evaluations. Teachers do occasionally receive helpful feedback from an individual students. But in such cases the teacher is faced with the dilemma of deciding whether the concern is a personal one or a perception shared by other students in the class. In addition, it appears that efforts to improve teaching must recognize defensiveness as a significant deterrent.

Thus, a case can be made for the use of CFT: being self administered it eliminates the intermediary as a source of defensiveness; it provides the kind of information that appears to be most credible to teachers, i.e. student perceptions; it has the capacity to provide feedback that is immediate, specific, descriptive, and reinforcing.

The administration of CFT can be simple and unobtrusive. A selected number of students are requested to write an anonymous critique each meeting of the class. Different students are chosen each period until all students in the class have participated. A second round then begins. The selection process can be done in a variety of ways: random, alphabetical, volunteer. Having a student designated to hand out and collect critiques is convenient.

The number of students selected to participate each day will depend upon the size of the class. For very small classes the system might not work as well as for larger classes because of familiarity and diminished anonymity. Using five or six students each day seems to work well in average size classes of 25 to 50 students; reliablity estimates for that number of student evaluators is about .80 (Clevenger, 1962).

At the beginning of class a critique sheet is given to the day's evaluators. The critique sheet should be tailored to the situation. A blank sheet of paper will work. However, in order to track performance and make comparisons over time, it is advisable to have specific items for students to respond to in addition to open ended comments. One format that has worked well is a semantic differential (Figure 1) composed of items related to effective teaching. Norton,s (1979, 1980) work on communicator style, and studies by Barak (1971) and Pitman (1985) on effective teaching were used as sources for the scale items.

Directions given to students might be general, such as "I would like to find out how things are going in the class. Please describe both effective and ineffective teaching that you observe during the period. Please also comment on past classes if you like, but label comments so that they may be distinguished from today's." Or if you want to target specific behaviors you might say, "Please comment on the pacing of the exercises conducted in class today. Note instances when either too much or too little time was allowed to complete the assignment."

Immediate feedback captures the significance of CFT as a communication approach. Therefore, its value will be enhanced by using effective practices in giving and receiving feedback. Students should receive directions on at least two guidelines for giving feedback (Jung, 1972; Johnson, 1986); being descriptive and being specific. For example, if the student makes evaluative statement such as "the class was boring," or a general statement such as "you get off the topic," the instructor's appropriate response is not apparent. It is much easier to respond to descriptive statements such as "your voice is monotone and puts me to sleep," or "I would like to hear more examples," or "I have read the chapter and was looking for some application." Examples of specific statements might include such items as "I failed to see the relevance of the Psychology Today article," or "I get confused when you say that you will cover something later and then you don't."

Being descriptive and specific applies to positive behaviors as well as to negative ones; behaviors that are reinforced are likely to occur more often. For example, statements such as "it was a great class today," or "you are a fine teacher" are non referential in behavioral terms and thus unlikely to reinforce the behaviors which elicited the student's response.

Guidelines for the instructor to follow in receiving feedback (Jung, 1972) include: stating what you want feedback about, checking what you have heard, and sharing your reactions to the feedback. Application of the first of these guidelines has been addressed above.

By far the most important of these guidelines is to share reactions with the students to the feedback. In application, this means not only changing teaching behaviors, but responding verbally (i.e. "I duplicated a copy of the overhead used yesterday for each of you because I received reports that it was too small to see;" "I received some requests to write main ideas on the board so I will be doing that more frequently.")

Students will continue to respond openly if the teacher is both open and responsive to suggestions. Comments will vary in their usefulness, but most items deserve at least a verbal response. Some comments may seem to be unfair criticism, but the teacher must handle such situations constructively (not defensively) or risk losing the trust of the student and thus, honest feedback. Comments that

initially seem personal or biting become more palatable as time goes on and the instructor gains greater objectivity.

The number of written responses received each class is small. Items mentioned by more than one student are likely to be of more general concern, but there are exceptions. For example, one student might express embarrassment in response to a class exercise while others might be reluctant to do so. Occasionally, a perceptive student will make a helpful, relevant observation that other students will miss. A list can be made of items that are of general concern, especially when they occur in successive classes, to assist the instructor's preparation for future instruction.

Some items need clarification and class response; in doing this students should realize that they need not reveal themselves as the source of the comments. Students have come to expect and comment favorably on having the critiques from the previous class period summarized. Negotiable items are sometimes voted on. One indicator of openness has been students spontaneously (without being assigned) handing in comments on the class. This should be encouraged.

Data collected from student's responses to semantic differential items provides an ongoing monitor of teacher performance. My use of the technique suggests that a fairly consistent profile will emerge (for each person) revealing student perceptions of strengths as well as weaknesses. Based upon the profile, the teacher can select areas for improvement and track progress each class period. Because

established behaviors are resistent to change, success in using CFT will hinge upon the teacher recognizing that change will come slowly through persistent effort and through setting goals that can be reached.

Once the focus for improvement has been determined, consulting the literature on pedagogy can be beneficial. The work by Murray (1988), is an excellent source for specific behaviors that are likely to relate to target areas. On the other hand, conceptual approaches such as Wulff's (1988) case studies can provide direction for one's overall approach to the teaching act. .

Using the CFT appears to benefit the instructor in several areas: an increase in self-monitoring and in one's ability to discriminate between effective/ineffective behaviors, a greater sensitivity and responsiveness to students both in and out of class, a strengthened motivation to teach well, an increasing ability to be open to student feedback.

Presently an experimental study is underway concerned with the affects of using CFT. Obviously, a show of significant effects for the technique could greatly impact teacher development as well as teacher training programs.

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TEACHER ASSESSMENT FORM

Please report your impressions of the teacher's performance today on the following items.

ORGANIZED	___:___:___:___:___	DISORGANIZED
SUBDUED	___:___:___:___:___	DRAMATIC
CLEAR	___:___:___:___:___	UNCLEAR
FRIENDLY	___:___:___:___:___	UNFRIENDLY
CLOSED	___:___:___:___:___	OPEN
RELAXED	___:___:___:___:___	TENSE
LETHARGIC	___:___:___:___:___	ANIMATED
MOTIVATING	___:___:___:___:___	BORING
UNIMPRESSIVE	___:___:___:___:___	IMPRESSIVE
VARIETY	___:___:___:___:___	MONOTONY
INEFFECTIVE	___:___:___:___:___	EFFECTIVE
INTERACTIVE	___:___:___:___:___	LECTURE

Please report instances of effective or ineffective teaching that stood out. Also comment on things that should have been done that were not. Any suggestions you have for improving the class are welcome.